

ACCOUNT OF THE DISCOVERY

OF PART OF THE

SAXON ABBEY CHURCH OF PETERBOROUGH.

BY J. T. IRVINE, ESQ.

(*Read 6 Dec. 1893.*)

THESE remains came to light through the following circumstances. The state of the lantern-tower had in 1882 become so very dangerous as to render it evident considerable rebuilding was both an immediate and imperative necessity. The Chapter, however, then hoped it would not require extension beyond removal and reconstruction of the crossings, eastern pillars,¹ and fractured lantern over. Such removal rendered it, however, evident that the state of the western ones could scarcely be with safety trusted to support the rebuilt work, and J. L. Pearson, Esq., R.A., the Chapter Architect, was therefore requested to survey and report to the Chapter on their actual condition, and the state of their foundations. For such purpose, on Sept. 25, 1883, Mr. Pearson had small excavations made round them, and under the centre of the west arch from crossing to nave; (for here all Norman foundations, however poor their construction or materials may be, are yet everywhere carried across the openings as "sleeper-walls".)

Mr. Pearson's survey commenced by an excavation at the north-east angle of the north-west pier. This opened part of the passage to that vault which Gunton, in his history of the Cathedral, mentions as existing on this north side.

The evidence given by the openings made at the angles

¹ Entries of the history of the south-east pillar of crossing:—1592, "In Repar' ecel'ie cath'is ib'm xvj^l xiijs. jd." (Richard Howland Bishop, Thomas Neville Dean.)

1593, "In reparacionib' eccle'ie ib'm ac in colomp'na magna juxta choru' meremio et ferro munienda xlvij^l iijs. ix^d."

1702-3, "Mr. Evans, a bill of Expence about y^e surveying y^e pillar i'th Church 0^l 16s. 11^d." Probably at this time the triforium arches next the pier were built up.

of this pillar,¹ and below the west arch, corresponded with that before gained from the excavations on the sites of the eastern piers, in proving that such ground, prior to the Norman structure's erection, had been merely open churchyard. When an opening was, however, made near the north-west angle of the south-west pier in nave, pre-Norman walling appeared for the first time. Westwards it ran on into the nave, and east into the crossing, there deeply cut down into by the Norman sleeper-wall crossing it at right angles. Its line was but a short space north from the sleeper-wall under the south arcade of the nave, stone rubbish filling up the space between. The sleeper-wall formed through the hollow trough of the Saxon structure was here faced up with older ashlar procured from those buildings the fire of 1116 destroyed.

The opening at the south-west corner of the same pillar, when the modern paving was removed, and an additional 5 in. of rubbish, laid bare that old pavement whereon the stalls rested previous to the change of the site of the choir by Dean Lockyer in 1734, with the burial-slab of Sub-Prior Francis; and again, at some depth below, what first was taken to be a layer of stone-dust.

The sinking near to its south-east angle disclosed, close to the surface, a strong but shallow foundation across the south transept-arch; being, in fact, that of the stone screen seen existing behind the stalls in the plate of the choir in Bridge's County History; of this a small fragment remained at the base of the south-east pillar, up to its removal for rebuilding. The sleeper-wall here became the north boundary of the excavation. Still lower down, at right angles to which a second wall of Saxon date appeared, looking to be, as it actually was, the east return-wall of that first found in the nave.

¹ The vault and passage Gunton mentions were eventually cleared out, and found to be work much later than of Norman times. Lead pipes entered the passage from the west, probably a water supply. These passed west through the north nave-aisle, and were afterwards found to enter the nave through a cutting made through the sleeper-wall below the second arch west from the crossing on the north side. The pipes, perhaps, went to St. Chad's Well in "Laurel Court" or Cloister Garth.

Eastwards, stone coffins and burials appeared. Along its west side (and a parcel of the wall itself) was opened a stone seat, its top surface and front covered with hard, grey, Saxon plastering. In front and below which the white layer seen westwards was again reached, and now found to be the plaster-flooring of that space these Saxon walls enclosed. This floor-level agreed in both excavations, and more careful search revealed it in the narrow space first opened, in parts thickly covered with burnt wood-ashes. The stone seat here was wanting.

The removal of this south-west crossing pillar manifested that such pier and the sleeper-walls were merely begun *on the surface of the Saxon plaster-flooring*, which, though sunk down and crushed by the enormous weight, yet so remained that its crushed surface could be washed to find whether painting or incising had existed, neither of which appeared. Among the loose materials on it lay a tile of Norman date, with incised ornament; others, of two patterns, were found (see later on); possibly additions by Abbot Ernulph, prior to 1114.

On this floor, among the fragments of rough limestone, one stone, on removal, was found to have on its lower surface the impress of a man's hand, as if it had been first laid spread out open on the thick wood-ashes on the floor, and then impressed on the flat side of the stone, as a rude memorial of the Saxon structure's fate. This stone was unfortunately left outside, and the rain washed the impress off. Under none of the four pillars was any sort of foundation-stone found.

The necessary removal of all materials above the limestone rock over that space required for the concrete blocks to support the rebuilt pillars, exposed the north-east angle of the Saxon structure, whose north wall, retaining much of its hard, grey plaster-coating, became on that side a boundary to the mass.¹

This removal of so much of the old Saxon flooring brought to light, from beneath it, that fine fragment of string ornamented with interlacing work (its top and

¹ The vault over the remains of the Saxon church enables the visitor to pass round and study on two sides the character of the square blocks of concrete under the south-west pillar of the crossing, a specimen of those on which the tower is resting at present.

bottom surfaces plain), which is now built up into the south-west pillar; and a holy water basin of stone, having one side straight, the other three-fourths round. Still more singular, it evidenced the fact that stones were among the materials of this Saxon walling which had belonged to a still earlier structure, for they yet retained patches of like hard, grey plaster received whilst the wall-stones of an earlier building.

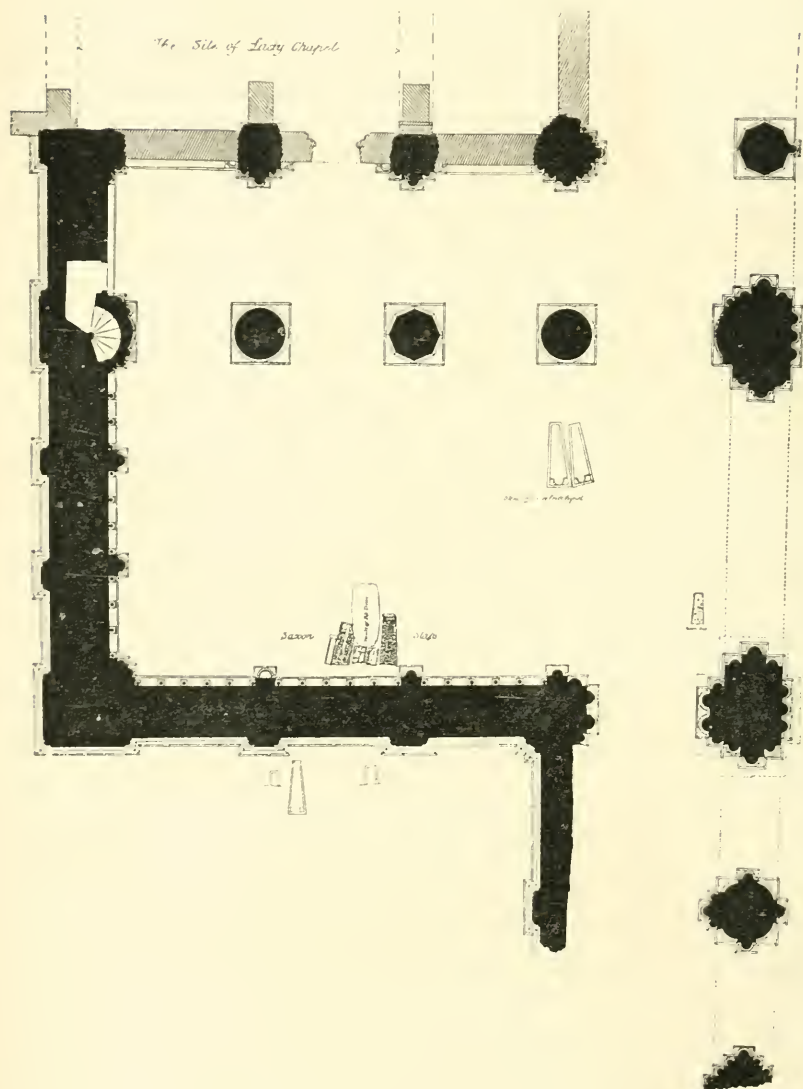
The stone seat along the west or inside face of this east wall seemed to suggest doubts of its being part of the church; though the burials to north, and stone coffins and burials eastward, proved such space to be formerly church yard. Of the "great stones" described as "requiring several yoke of oxen to draw them" no trace appeared below ground.

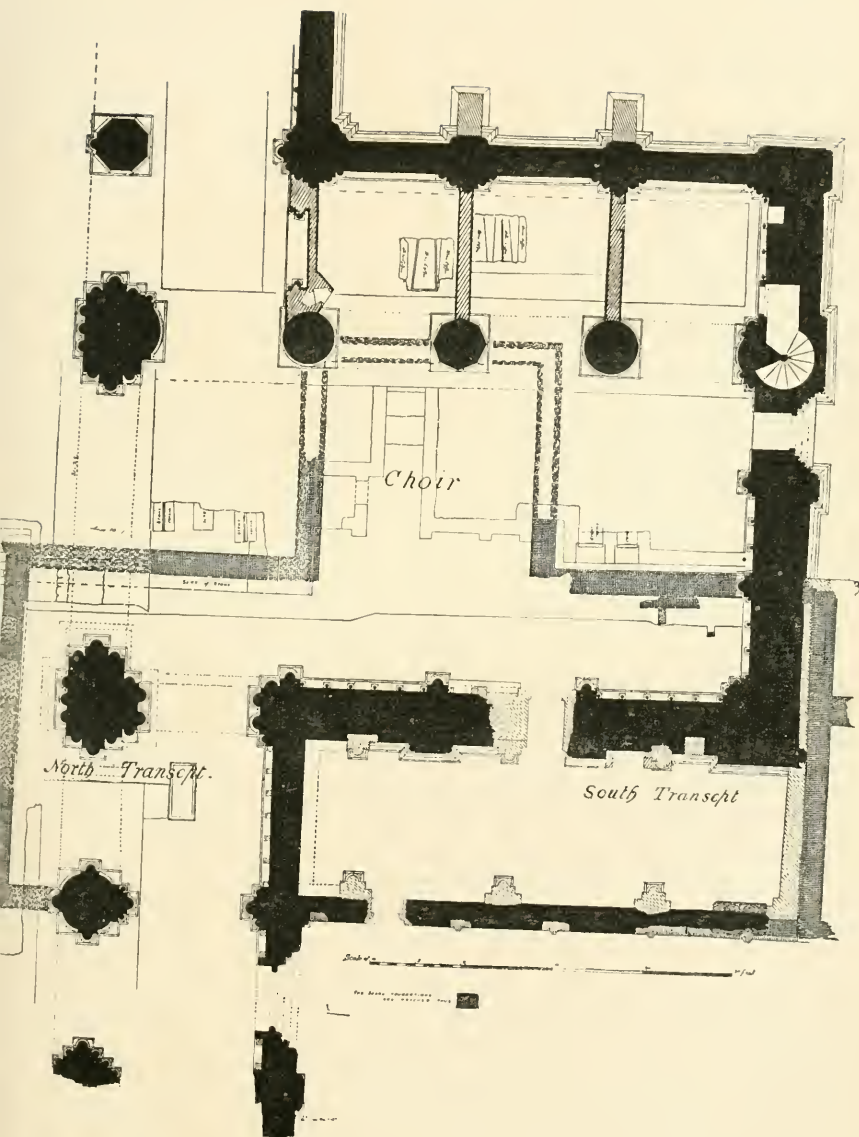
Other small excavations made at a later period, to enable Mr. J. L. Pearson to report further on the condition of the foundations of south transept, opened a continuation, as it seemed, of the above east wall passing outwards in the same line under the Norman gable wall, and (externally) discovered it to return westwards to the cloister. The interest of these Saxon remains induced the Reverend Dean Perowne (now Lord Bishop of Worcester) to decide that, as soon as conveniently it could be effected, the whole should be uncovered, to see whether they were parts of the early Abbey Church or no. When, therefore, the reconstructed central tower permitted of the removal from its arches of the great timbers used for shoring and centering, such search became practicable, and the order for it was given.

After careful consideration, it seemed probable, should the fragments laid open belong to the Saxon Abbey Church, that the extreme width obtained must represent *transept widths*, as it was so considerable. If so, its small chancel must therefore, of necessity, be found lying between *that fragment* to east of the south-west crossing pier, and a somewhat similar amount cut off, commencing from the wall discovered outside the south transept gable. An average of such probable quantities suggested where the walls of its choir might be found; that *northwards* just south of the present line of the nave wall of the south aisle; and the line of the *south wall* of its choir at the point

PETERBOROUGH CATHEDRAL.

PLAN—Showing the Foundations of the Saxon Church and other recent discoveries.





J. T. Irvine, del.

whereabout a nearly equal amount would reach extended from outside the present south gable wall. At those points, therefore, labourers were set to dig down to the level of the Saxon floor. The first, placed at the supposed point of north wall of choir, passed down through broken stones, lime core, etc., reaching merely the floor plaster. The second struck the expected south angle of choir wall exactly. Thus proving the position of the first to have been a little too far south. He, therefore, sank again further north and opened the wall, there standing one foot high, retaining on its surface the hard grey plaster coating. Roughly speaking, its line was with that of the south wall of nave, and not, as supposed, to south of it.

It was next sought to discover whether the wall found first (in nave) was that of a north aisle, or the gable of a transept; for if the last, it would terminate at a point tolerably capable of being approximated to; or if otherwise, continue westwards. About such point an opening was therefore made, and the ending found with distinct remains of its return as a west wall southwards; thus was the width of the transept determined. Some large stones appearing in its north edge that might be steps, the excavation was then extended eastwards, back over this wall, to discover whether any door existed; but there was none; the stones being those of the lower course of its square plinths left in from the churchyard earth covering them. According to usual Saxon custom, the floor inside was lower than the ground outside, hence inwardly the wall remained about three courses high, keeping considerable remains of its plastering.

The next endeavour, was discovery of whether the choir terminated in an apse, or was square-ended. Its side walls were followed eastward, to the west face of the sleeper wall, under the pillars of arcade, in front of the chapels of this transept; on approaching which a narrow strip of the flooring was found raised to a height of about two low steps above the ordinary level.

Excavations were made in both the chapels of St. Benedict and St. Oswald, where, had an apse existed, it would have been found. But in both cases the stone coffins and their lids (that might fairly be described as

paving the ancient ground level of the monks' cemetery¹) presented with their ends near the sleeper wall's eastern face a tolerably straight line; proving that such sleeper wall by its greater width covered and hid the square-ended narrow east wall of the Saxon choir.

There remained, therefore, only to ascertain information relative to the Saxon gable and walls external to south transept, so far as the works of underpinning extended: this first along gable wall; then under the end of music-room, and for a distance in the cloister of 10 ft. 6 in. from the angle of that structure northwards.

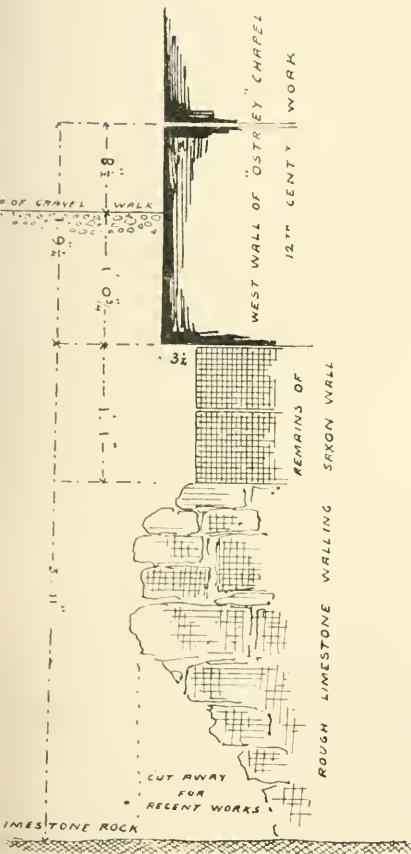
The Saxon east wall of south transept inside the modern one was uncovered, exposing near its centre a mass of masonry, intended to support the reredos of its altar. This had been an addition to the Saxon church, for the older plastering remained along the wall behind the added masonry. The Norman gable was here placed so close inside the Saxon one that the vertical face of its external ashlar becomes also the very vertical face of the internal plastering of the other.

The excavations made outside the Norman gable proved its foundation to be simply placed on the surface of the Saxon plaster floor (which indeed is the case wheresoever the older church extends).

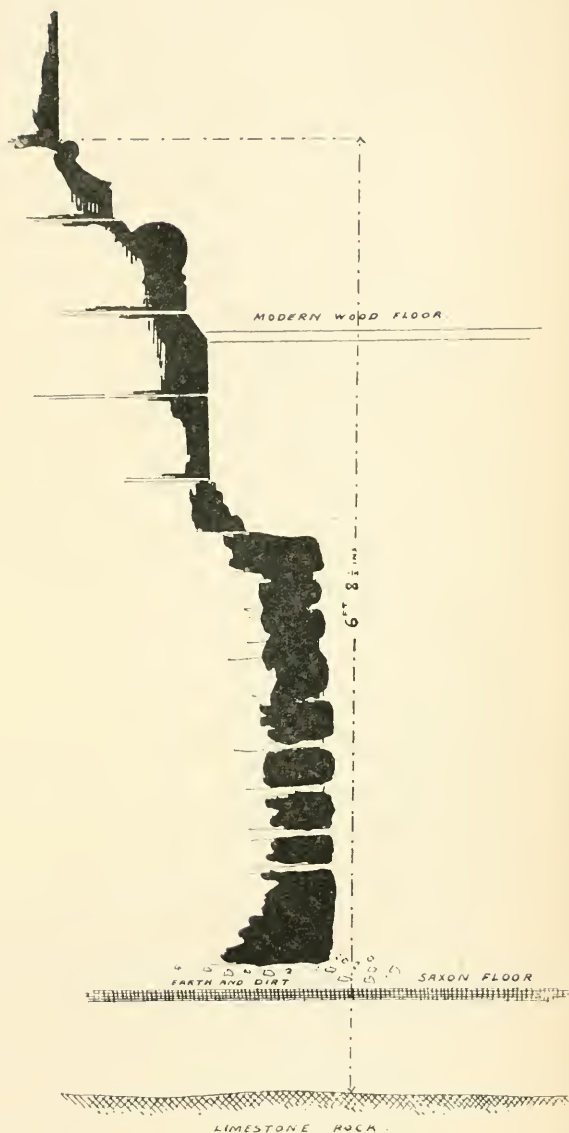
The few courses of quoins of the south-east angle of the pre-Norman transept (left below ground) are all large stones, in some of which are "lewis holes". These were probably brought from Roman buildings at "The Castles"; that Roman town lying between Alwalton and Water Newton. This angle is under those two other fragments above ground of the east walls of the slype (of *Norman* and *Early-English* styles). A little further west of which, the east wall of that of the Saxon age was also exposed; the south wall of which, there is reason to believe, is underground, not far off.

The Saxon gable extended quite up to the present cloister, under the end wall of the music-room (or chapel of "the Ostrey"), with which it returns northwards. Such early transition Norman wall resting on,

¹ At Peterborough. In no case was any stone coffin found in connection with Saxon interments; only monumental slabs. All those stone coffins seen appeared to belong to the Norman period.



REMAINS OF WEST WALL OF SAXON SOUTH
TRANSEPT.



WEST WALL OF SOUTH TRANSEPT, SHOWING FOUNDATION
AS SET ON SAXON FLOOR.

PETERBOROUGH CATHEDRAL.

SECTIONS THROUGH ANCIENT FOUNDATIONS.



and projecting over it, westwards, about $3\frac{1}{4}$ in. Two or three of the Saxon ashlar courses below remain, and at the point where the excavation ended at 6 ft. $10\frac{1}{2}$ in. north from the south-west angle of the music-room, their top surface was but 1 ft. $0\frac{3}{4}$ in. below that of the gravel walk.

The ancient plaster surface of floor here (still thickly covered by burnt wood ashes) is 6 ft. $8\frac{1}{2}$ in. below the top line of the Norman plinth seen inside south end of this room, and from this last to surface of limestone rock, 7 ft. $6\frac{1}{2}$ in., the surface of stone has been wrought.

No mark of monument or interment was anywhere seen over so much of the Saxon flooring as was uncovered, but an interment made prior to its building was seen below the south-west angle of the Saxon transept.

The remains of wrought stones from the Saxon Abbey Church found were of no great number;¹ though some were architecturally interesting, from presenting that groping after mouldings, and, at times, slight trace of approach to Norman feeling, which frequently is found just prior to the Conquest.

No trace of any Roman structure existing on this site came to light.² Though during the removal of the lower foundation of the north-east pillar of crossing, a fragment, covered with leaf carving, was found. It belonged to the lower part of the attached pillar of a Roman temple, and during the removal of part of that sleeper wall under

¹ The Norman foundations, formed of small stones, have at the old ground-level an edging or outline of two, or at times even three, courses of old ashlar, derived from the monastic buildings destroyed in 1116; from which courses almost all the fragments of interest brought to light were obtained. The site of the new church moved north and east. Its parts seem to be always double those of the early church: parts of about 6 ft. governing its design.

² During the underpinning of the west wall of the north transept a remarkable ditch was laid open, its line just outside of the wall of the north aisle of the nave. In it alone the Norman foundation reached the rock into which the ditch was cut, the Norman foundation here resting on rows of herring-bone stones filling in its hollow. From this ditch was obtained the greater part of the fragments of wedge-shaped bricks (to over one hundred) recovered. It may probably mark the boundary of that Medeshamstede destroyed in 870. It was again seen when the apparatus-room, north of the nave, was excavated in 1893, and at least furnished then a fresh and more nearly perfect specimen.

the arch into south transept to form the vaulted passage round the Saxon remains, one of its facing stones was found to retain the fragment of an inscription probably derived from the same temple; a further fragment of which stone came out from below the gable of north transept. These, with two fragments of Roman brick and a bit of stone plinth found high up in the lantern's walls, were of that age the only items. Probably all came from the site of the Roman town called "The Castles", beyond Alwalton; property of the Monastery at an early period.

Of the Saxon remains were: one arm of a cross and other small fragment with interlacing ornament. Remains of arch, imposts, and two jambs not unlikely of the period of (that Abbot of many Abbeys) Leofric, who is said to have led South Peterborough's contingent to the red field of Senlac. A tympanum from over a square-headed door. Plinths of another. A fine specimen of a "long stone" from a vertical pilaster strip. Two fragments of an ordinary mid-wall slab, having round the outside of opening a half-round roll, one piece of which retained also the holes for the metal fastenings of its wooden shutter. Two fragments of rudely-pillared jamb stones or responds of an arch (difficult to have been understood had not jambs of similar plan remained to the choir arch of Wittering (its daughter church). Two bases, one square, one round, which if not Saxon must be very late Roman. Several double shafts of no very great length, roughly shaped, and then coated with a very thin coat of the finest and hardest Saxon plaster to a smooth round surface, perhaps from the cloister, but neither caps nor bases were recovered. A piece of what the Saxon mason no doubt thought was a classic architrave round an arch. Part of the end of an ornamentally perforated mid-wall light slab, similar to those remaining in the upper lights of Barnack Tower, and the only other specimen yet known in England. Fragments of moulded strings. The north-east angle of a very early monumental slab, perhaps that of a Saxon Abbot. Its moulding was very much in accord with those of the above strings. Some of the fragments found retained traces of the fire of 1116.

The remarkably beautiful Saxon monuments found inside the north transept of the present church are here omitted, as being only in the churchyard of the Saxon church. There is in the west wall of vault over the Saxon remains, very near the south gable, and quite close to the masonry of altar found there, a small recess, on the floor, which marks the spot whereon one of the early tiles before mentioned was found lying in its original position on the Saxon floor. Its surface was terribly burnt from the fierceness of the fire which destroyed the church. It was hoped to have it here retained, but it was eventually removed to prevent the visitors from carrying it off.

Some fragments of tiles with ornament in relief were found below the south-east angle of south transept. Similar tiles did, some years ago, remain in the floor of the north transept at St. Alban's Abbey. Among the stone rubbish filling in the Saxon choir were found two large blocks of Barnack stone.

The sum of the discoveries is briefly thus:—

1st. The choir of the Saxon Abbey Church, about 23 ft. 3 in. wide inside its walls. Thickness of walls, 2 ft. 8 in. A distinct line of junction appeared to exist between its south wall and the east one of south transept.

2nd. Its two transepts were found. Length of north one from inside of choir wall to inside north gable, 31 ft. 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. Width inside north transept, from west to east, 34 ft. 8 in.; from choir to south transept-gable, 31 ft. 8 in., and east wall of Saxon work, 2 ft. 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. Width across transepts, 91 ft. 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. Re-used stones from a former church were seen present in the walls of both transepts. No opportunity occurred to lay open any part of its nave, or nave-aisles, if they exist. The *Saxon Chronicle* states that its tower was “gehalgod” in 1059.

The whole of the Saxon walling, so far as it existed inside the present church, was excavated and vaulted over. So that it is now possible to follow it completely round from the north-west angle of its north transept—round its choir and south transept, and thence up to the gable wall of the south transept of the Norman church.

The floor of the vault is that of the old Saxon Abbey Church of 1066.

It is but just to say that the Chapter and Committee would not have been able to connect the portion in nave with that of what was found in the transept, had not the generosity of Mr. John Thompson, of Peterborough, made them the gift of that part below the crossing by which the connection is complete, and the interest to visitors so much increased :—remains wherein the famous Hereward, the Saxon leader, must have kept his vigil the night previous to his knighthood.
